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THE AMAZING POLITICAL ASCENSION OF GADDI VASQUEZ:  
OR IS HE JUST ANOTHER ONE OF GEORGE BUSH'S "LITTLE BROWN ONES"?

by Joe Bustillos

August in New Orleans. He purposefully paused at the podium at the Republican National convention before beginning his 10-minute speech, a huge grin on his round face.

Less than four short years ago his first attempt at an elected office was met with defeat. A city council seat in the Southern California suburb of Orange---not something one would normally consider worthy of even a minor footnote in the national ledger of political skirmishes.

But now they were calling Gaddi Vasquez, 33, "one of the most attractive up-and-coming Latino politicians in California," "nationally, a rising star among GOP Hispanics."

In the course of his debut before a national audience at the Superdome, Vasquez took direct aim at the Democratic Presidential candidate's claim to rights for the Hispanic vote.

According to Vasquez, Michael Dukakis "may speak Spanish but he doesn't speak our language. . . His actions and philosophy do not reflect the beliefs or the traditions with which we have been raised."

From defeated candidate for a city council seat to being a national spokesman for the Hispanic community is some jump in four short years.

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But those two events are only points on the chart of a public-service career that Vasquez began as a 19-year-old city of Orange policeman. Following stints in community relations for the Southern California cities of Orange and Redlands and a job as an executive assistant for Orange County Supervisor Bruce Nestande, Vasquez was asked by California gov. George Deukmejian in 1985 to become his liaison to the Hispanic community.

During the next year and a half Vasquez was promoted three more times, culminating in the surprise appointment in 1987 to his former boss's seat on the Orange County Board of Supervisors. Thirteen months later Vasquez secured his Board of Supervisor job at the polls by defeating his opponent with a 2-to-1 margin.

Many critics have said that Vasquez's rapid rise from street cop to the national-convention podium is due to the GOP's need to secure the Hispanic vote. According to these critics there were dozens of qualified Southern California politicians seeking the non-partisan Board of Supervisor job when Deukmejian tagged Vasquez for the post. And Vasquez's appearance at the national-convention is just another attempt by the GOP to attract Hispanics to the party, according to his critics.

"He's being picked because he's Hispanic. I don't think there's any doubt about that," said John Hanna, chairman of the Orange County Democratic Central Committee.

But Vasquez defends his rapid political ascension as being the result of a lot of hard work on his part and the fact that

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the present administration in Washington has made it possible for anyone willing to work to also prosper.

Two days following his victorious June election I met with Vasquez in his fifth floor office at the Hall of Administration. The late afternoon Southern California sun cast long shadows in what might be the comfortable office of the president of a medium sized bank. It dawned on me as I sat down that the uncharacteristically clear panorama of brown hills and homes and blue cloudless sky outside his window was the district that had just overwhelming voted him into office for another four years. It was a rather large territory to behold.

Question: In '73 when you graduated from high school people were using words like "establishment" and Vietnam was still a hot topic. Why, given that particular milieu, did you choose to go into law enforcement?

Gaddi Vasquez: Well, I had been involved in a Police Exploring program and then was a cadet with the City of Orange police department.

I had always enjoyed law enforcement. It was adventurous, it was challenging. And, I've always been a very conservative person in terms of my ideals and principles. And law enforcement is, obviously, very conservative, very much grounded in ideals and ethics.

The recession was just beginning, during the Ford administration. I was in college, at Chapman College, and I had the unique opportunity made, or offered to me to become a<sub>15</sub> regular sworn peace officer at the age of nineteen, which<sup>^</sup>the youngest police officer in the City of Orange, or in the history of the county. I looked on that as a challenge, because I've always done things at an age that is typically younger.

Question: accelerated

Gaddi Vasquez: Yeah, very accelerated. And so, I looked upon that as a challenge particularly because I am the youngest police officer that has gone through the Los Angeles Police Academy.

They just said, "There's no way this guy's going to survive" because it is very quasi-militaristic, six months long, very high stress, very very challenging physically, emotionally. "You won't make it, boom." And I graduated class valedictorian. So, it was a challenge, it was an opportunity, and it was something that I enjoyed. And still enjoy. I still go out and ride with my old buddies, from time to time, just to get the feel of it.

It was very good to me. The Law enforcement profession was very good to me.

Question: Where did this conservative attitude come from? Who inspired you to have these conservative ideals?

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Gaddi Vasquez: Well, first of all, I'm the son of a clergyman, who, by virtue of their belief, practice a very conservative very family-oriented [ideal]. I guess most of it comes from being constantly grateful for what I have.

More so back then, but even more nowadays, patriotism does not necessarily abound in this country. We're all happy to be Americans but . . . when you are raised in the environment that I was raised in, poverty, virtually nothing, we lived in absolute . . . I mean, nothing that probably most of which you would consider poverty in Orange County today would not even compare to where we lived when I was a kid. But in that environment we had parents that were very hard working, who never lacked in affection and love for us. Gave us, my brother, who is two years younger than me, gave us everything they could under the circumstances.

When I went to see "La Bamba", for instance, the first four years of my life was spent in Watsonville, California, which is right next door to Salinas, which is right next door to Macheco Pass, which is where Valens was from. And my touching moment came in the part [of the movie] where they're in the migrant camp and the little kid is in the "latina" being bathed. My wife is sitting there and I choked [up]. She looked over and she says, "What's the matter?" And I said, "That's me right there. That's where we lived. That's the environment we lived in."

And there I was sitting in that theater as a county supervisor twenty-nine years later basically. And when you think

in that context, and all along in my life I've never stopped really being grateful for the opportunities that I've had because, being the youngest county supervisor in the history of this county, being the first Latino---now elected---county supervisor in this county, is an honor for me that is just beyond description.

So, all those things combined and created a person with an attitude of, "you know what? I'm really grateful for what I have."

But all that combined resulted in a individual who's really proud to be an American. I'm proud of my Hispanic roots, and my Mexican roots, but I'm most of all proud to be an American.

I always tell people, "I don't want to be known as the Hispanic county supervisor. I want to be known as the supervisor who happens to be Hispanic." And if I can be of an inspiration to other young Latinos, to aspire and say, "It can be done, it can be done."

I got sixty-six thousand votes two nights ago in a county a Latino, most people would have said, [it will be a] long time [before that happens] and I got sixty-six-thousand votes in a very difficult environment, politically. We raised \$410,000.

So all those things combined have resulted in someone who is very very grateful and have a very very profound, and my parents always taught us, to have a very profound respect for church, for your country, and I've always done that.

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Question: In your high school yearbook the Mecha society is mentioned as an on campus club. I guess there's a particular stereotype of the Mecha student.

When I went to Loyola Marymount [University in Los Angeles] my parents, being good Republicans from Orange County, told me, "don't associate with those people," before I even went there. It's just an interesting thing, because I see that you weren't involved with that group in any way but you were politically motivated and involved with student government. That was a conscious choice on your part?

Gaddi Vasquez: Yes it was, because I was one during breaks, during lunch time, the Mecha group sort of hung together. You know, I was just never raised that way. I sort of felt sorry for them because they were so isolated. I wondered why do they have to isolate themselves? Why can't they mingle with everybody else. I mean, I mingle with everybody else. So, it's just basically a feeling that I didn't have to identify myself because that particular Mecha group was there, segregated themselves. And I'm not one who believes in segregation, I'm one who believes that we need to integrate.

Question: Bringing the values from home.

Gaddi Vasquez: Absolutely. And make society better and stronger because of who you are and what you are. And not to be off in

the corner by yourself, hanging around with your peers, who, in those instances, typically, didn't offer a lot of inspiration. It's almost like they gathered to compare notes about the problems in their lives.

Question: A rather negative attitude.

Gaddi Vasquez: Yeah. And people who saw that looked at it in a rather negative light. And I know that I used to catch flak, you know, "who's the coconut?" and that kind of thing.

Fine, fine, that's okay, if that's your problem. And then later I'd come back as a police officer and I'd, say, patrol the streets and see these guys now out of high school, and I had to put some of them in jail. And some of them are not alive anymore. Some of them are dead by ODs or shootings or stab wounds. And so I, I never really associated with that group. Although, I can tell you that they did respect me. They'd take their shots at me. I can tell you I've seen a lot of them since then. Now it's, "We always knew you'd make it, Gaddi."

Question: If it hadn't been law-enforcement, would it have been ministry?

Gaddi Vasquez: (pause) I would probably say yes. I would probably say yes. I've always had a very profound faith, that God is the only architect of our lives, and that . . . this has



been confirmed just by virtue of the fact that I'm sitting here. Because in 1984 I ran for city council [for the city of Orange] and came in fourth.

There were three incumbents. I missed it by about fifteen-hundred votes. [I] got sixteen-thousand votes. And we worked hard, raised a lot of money, we did a lot of work, and I lost. And I got recruited by the Southern California Edison Company to be area manager for central Orange County, took the job, good pay everything. Within four months of that job the governor's office called saying that the governor would like to talk to you about being his assistant for Hispanic affairs. And I, you know, initially resisted because I was done with politics, I didn't want it anymore.

Question: You were hurt by the experience . . .

Gaddi Vasquez: A little bit. Or at least, it offered me . . . it inspired the thought, "Well maybe I'm just not cut out for that stuff, let's go to the private sector, make some good money and establish myself in a long-term career route." Edison gave me a fabulous package, a great company to work for. They gave me my own area. And so I said yes to the governor, and four months later I was promoted to deputy appointments secretary and a year later I was promoted to chief appointments secretary and then two months into that job I was appointed to the board of supervisors. And here I sit now in June of 1988 after thirteen months on the

board, elected starting four years in January in 1989. And that's where I sit back and I say, "Well, you know, there is somebody greater than me, because, when I thought that it was . . . that that was it, to come back . . .

Question: Things began to open up for you . . .

Gaddi Vasquez: . . . Had I not lost that election I would not have been able to go to Sacramento to be on the governor's staff, you see. I think and I turn this all back and I think, wow, it's almost like there was a bigger scheme here.

A good friend of mine who's in politics said, "Gaddi Vasquez, remember something, it's a lot better to learn how to lose a political campaign when you're on the outside trying to get in than to be on the inside and have the people throw you out, because you have gained experience that will be important to you." And you know what? I heard the words of that man echo over the last six months. As we campaigned hard, as we raised our money and so on and so forth, I could hear those words and it all paid off two nights ago.

So, in essence, I would say that, given my real profound faith, that had it not been law-enforcement that's a real good probability. But again, the ministry is the kind of thing that I believe that you have to clearly have a calling. It's not something that you just wake up and say I want to do some day. It's something that you have to have a calling for. You have to

feel compassion for the people, want to help, willing to help people, have to be willing to deny yourself, have to be willing to make personal sacrifices.

One of my assistants, her husband is a youth minister for Covenant Presbyterian of Orange, and so he's there and it's the kind of thing that, as I look at them, they, she makes good money here, she's very very bright, and he is too, I know that they have to make certain sacrifices.

Question: It's a very difficult thing.

Gaddi Vasquez: And so, I have to weigh all of that, and I just, I've never felt that real deep calling to say that I'm ready to walk away from everything.

Question: Did your father encourage you in any particular direction, when it was coming towards the end of high school?

Gaddi Vasquez: No. One of the good things about my parents, my parents were never the people to try to steer our destiny, our direction. They were people who just left us alone, sometimes much to my chagrin. My mom would say, whatever you want to do.

Question: And you were looking for leadership . . .

Gaddi Vasquez: Yeah, at times you'd just sit there and say, "Come on, give me an idea, tell me what you want [me] to do."

I'll never forget, one day I was in the American Legion Oratorical contest and I was getting ready, climbing up the rungs getting to the state championships, and I had one more hurdle to clear, the county championships here in Orange County. And the day that, the day contest came I had a terrible cold, nasal sounds, and you've got to be in top form, this is the big one. And I had a cold and everything.

And I said, "I'm not going. I am not going. I can't go like this. I may as well forget it, I'm not going to win, I'm going to lose."

And I was wanting her to tell me, you know, "Go, go, go, go." But she said, "Fine, if you want to walk away from it, do what you think is right. If that's how you feel you want to deal with this, fine. Don't go."

It was almost the more she told me don't go that there was a little voice propelling me saying you better go. And I did. And I won. And I came home and I got real emotional because, in fact I can remember the conversation, it was "how could God do this to me, here I am right on the verge of a boy's state championship, and God this and God that." And of course, when I got home I repented and thanked God for the victory.

Question: [laughter]

Gaddi Vasquez: Which is the kind of thing where she always have that kind of attitude, "You do what you think is best." And so I've learned to fend for myself because I was raised that way.

Question: It's traditional for the Hispanic to be a Democrat. It's traditional for the Hispanic to be Roman Catholic. Those are the first two things where you jump off the boat. Has that created a sense of identity-alienation as far as what others assume about you?

Gaddi Vasquez: Well, I think first of all, when people question my [ethnic loyalty], and there are those who question my loyalty to my ethnic group because of my political affiliation, as one once said, "Gaddi Vasquez is one of the greatest Hispanic leaders who has ever come to this region, the only unfortunate thing is that he does not belong to his people's party." And I say, that's not true because all the trends and polls indicate that young Latinos are registering as Republicans in greater numbers than they are as Democrats. Here in Orange County there are many, many, many Latino Business men and women who are Republicans, who are successful people, and who are Republican.

But on the political front, no one can question my understanding of my people. I was raised in a migrant worker environment. I was raised in poverty. I speak and read and write Spanish fluently. And I know many people who claim to have a very deep conviction about their ethnicity but can't even

speaking the language. To me that's my testament and I speak it fluently.

I could sit here with the President of Mexico [gesturing to the seat next to me] and have an intelligent, profound, in-depth conversation. I could read it. I could write it. And most of all, I'm giving a lot back to the Latino community.

Our struggle of our people does not ride the back of a donkey or the back of an elephant. It is the profound need of our people that, if we don't diversify politically we will be taken for granted. And therein lies the strength . . .

Question: Placated

Gaddi Vasquez: Exactly. If people take you for granted, assume that all Latinos are Democrat, then you know what? You're going to be entrenched there. You're going to be taken for granted and you will never be able to achieve and make a difference.

I've been with the Republicans since I was old enough to vote. I have not been anything but a Republican. I think I was born a Republican because I made a decision.

On the religious side, my father's been protestant clergyman since I was born and therefore have only known that church, and have been active in the church. And our church is 95 percent Latino. So, it's not as if I stand alone.

And what you see, Time Magazine did a major feature not long ago about how the Catholic Church is very concerned that Latinos

are leaving the Catholic Church in very large numbers, because people are looking for a diversity. Spiritual diversity, political diversity, economic diversity.

In my campaign Latinos raised \$50,000 for my campaign of \$410,000. That is the largest amount ever raised for a Latino candidate in the history of this county. And those were Democrats and Republicans who didn't care whether Gaddi Vasquez was Republican, "he is one of ours and one of us, and we're going to have him succeed."

Here sits a Latino county supervisor in a county where the Hispanic population is 15 percent. I represent the most conservative district of the five, very Republican, 62 to 32 percent Republican, and yet people have applied the criteria of leadership [to me]. "Can this man do the job? Is this man qualified? Is he capable? Is he able?"

First George Deukmejian cast his vote of confidence by appointing me. Then on Tuesday 66,000 people said, "we like what this guy is doing, and we're going to put him in for another four years."

And that, in summary, is the reason that the diversity of our community, the fact that I am Republican, has never be a hindrance or an impediment, because my own personal history and roots will show you that I hardly was born with a silver spoon in my mouth. I've had to struggle like most Latinos have had to struggle.

Question: But instead of going at it with a chip on your shoulder it was that you were grateful to have the opportunity to do the things that have been presented to you.

Gaddi Vasquez: They say now that if you are a hard worker you are a "type A"---in my case, then if that's the case, I was born in a "type A" environment. My parents always worked their . . . I mean, from sunrise getting to those "bracero" trucks in the field to pick grapes, to do strawberries, to do string beans, to coming home at night. And that's been my life. That's all I've ever known. And so in this job I work just as hard. You channel it differently, obviously, because you are engaged in government and public policy. But, the ethic of working hard for what you want and what you achieve, that's always been. And that will never change.

Question: There were several who said when you were appointed last year to the [Orange] County board of supervisors that never having won an election before, that there was a lot of odds against you winning this election.

Gaddi Vasquez: I've had them all my life.

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